READING WITH A PURPOSE

THE MODERN ESSAY

SAMUEL McCHORD CROTHERS

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Reading With a Purpose

THE MODERN ESSAY

By

SAMUEL McCHORD CROTHERS

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WHY THIS COURSE IS PUBLISHED

THIS course has been prepared for those who wish to know the essayists of our own times. It comprises a very brief introduction to the subject and a guide to a few collections of essays. The books should be available in any general library, or may be obtained through any good book store.

An introduction to many essayists will result from following the course of reading suggested in this booklet. If you wish to continue your reading in this field the librarian of your Public Library will be glad to make suggestions. If you desire to increase your knowledge of other subjects, you are referred to the other courses in this Reading with a Purpose series, and to your Public Library.

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THE AUTHOR

SINCE *the turn of this century the essays of Samuel McChord Crothers have held an indisputable position in the first ranks of American literature.* THE GENTLE READER *and* THE UNDERSTANDING HEART, *published in 1903, established that position and each succeeding volume has strengthened it.*

To one of his books, Dr. Crothers gave the name, HUMANLY SPEAKING, *a phrase which has seemed to many to express the essence of his literary charm. Degrees, honorary and otherwise, from a half-dozen universities have done nothing to dull the glow of that quality. Twenty years as minister of the First Church (Unitarian), Cambridge, and as preacher to Harvard University have but added to it. Even if acquaintance were confined to the backs of his books it would be apparent.* BY THE CHRISTMAS FIRE, PLEASURES OF AN ABSENTEE LANDLORD, AMONG FRIENDS *are a few of the titles which proclaim this essential humanness.*

If a "Dean of the American Essay" were to be chosen it is safe to say that the choice would fall on Dr. Crothers.

THE MODERN ESSAY

READING WITH A PURPOSE is a phrase which unless explained would make the sensitive essayist hold up his hands in protest. "I don't want readers with a purpose," he would say. "I have no system and no doctrine to expound. I have no desire for programs. Those who seek such things should go elsewhere."

"Wait a moment," says the would-be reader, "till I explain what my purpose is. My purpose at this moment is not to acquire the greatest amount of information. If it were, I would take up a treatise, and study it conscientiously. My purpose is much more modest. I have a fragment of time at my disposal and I wish to spend it in an agreeable manner. One may have a purpose in making an afternoon call. It is not to borrow money or to make a business deal. It is to meet a friendly person and exchange ideas with him. There are no ulterior designs involved in the social transaction. The kind of literature I am looking for must not be too long-drawn-out. It must fit into my hour of leisure. I don't want it to be exhaustive, but suggestive."

"If that is your purpose, I approve of it," says the essayist, restored to good humor. "Izaak

Walton called angling the contemplative man's recreation. Walton would have had nothing to say to the busy man whose only purpose was to catch the largest trout and boast about it. The essay is written by contemplative men for the enjoyment of other contemplative men. There must be no incompatibility of temper between the writer and the reader. There must be a frank give and take. The essay is not like a sermon. There is no desire to convert. The essayist simply shows what is in his mind, and is really quite indifferent whether his reader agrees with him or not. It is a conversation between equals, and there is a continual change of subject, as one thought suggests another."

In this series I have been asked to deal chiefly with recent essays; but I may be allowed to suggest that the reader, if he is wise, will make friends as speedily as possible with the writers of other generations whose charm is perennial — Montaigne, Bacon, Thomas Fuller, Sir Thomas Browne, Addison and Steele and Hazlitt, Charles Lamb and Oliver Wendell Holmes and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

There you get the flavor and quality of the real essay, the quick wit and the mellow wisdom which give lasting joy. You also get a standard of judgment in regard to quality. It is really a matter of indifference where you begin. There is no chronological development in the essay, because it is a form

of literature whose value lies in personality. One instantly gets on friendly terms with Montaigne and thinks of him as a contemporary. It is just as easy to pick up a volume of Charles Lamb as it is to read an article in the latest magazine. This is, of course, hard on living writers who must meet the competition of the best men of other generations. But there are no tariff walls for the protection of the home market. Though this may be discouraging to the producer, it is to the advantage of the ultimate consumer of literature.

It would be futile to attempt to make a list of the "best" modern essays or to arrange them in the order of merit. In any magazine or newspaper one may happen upon an article that has a quality that arrests attention. We find that it is not only worth reading once, but that it invites re-reading. It is not only good journalism, but it is good literature. We should like to have it in some permanent form. When fugitive pieces have been collected into a volume of essays, they acquire a certain dignity, just as a person does when he becomes a householder and has his name on his doorplate.

Theodore Roosevelt
Woodrow Wilson

It happens that two presidents of the United States were accomplished essayists. Theodore Roosevelt's

Strenuous life and his volume entitled *History as literature and other essays* are to be recommended to those who seek an approach to good literature that is without pedantry. The title *Strenuous life* needs to be interpreted by Roosevelt himself. He was a believer in strenuosity, but he was wise enough to know the danger of over-strain. In the free use of literature he found the means of relief. His mind turned quickly from one subject to another, and his interest in the matter at hand was always intense. He had very decided ideas as to books and reading. His advice as to reading was to start with anything that is interesting. Then one book suggests another, and the circle of vital interests is continually enlarged. The busy man has always intervals of leisure, and if he knows how to use them he can always enrich his mind by new thoughts. Roosevelt's "Dante and the Bowery" is a very good example of the way the essayist uses his mind. To most people Dante is a far-off and vaguely dignified figure, and the Bowery is something with which he would have nothing to do. Roosevelt in his conflict with the "undesirable citizens" on the Bowery envies Dante his power of characterization, as he mentioned the undesirable citizens of Florence by name and gave each his appropriate place. Municipal politics and literature are shown in their real relation. Roosevelt had a way of breaking down the barriers between things

which ought to be brought together, but which are usually kept apart.

Woodrow Wilson's essays have a more academic flavor and are more delicately wrought. You will find the most distinctive work in the little volume entitled *Mere literature and other essays.* Wilson there tells of the writers to whom he owed most and who inspired him. He belongs in the company of literary statesmen more numerous in England than in America. They were men of letters as well as men of action. The Earl of Clarendon in the seventeenth century, Edmund Burke in the eighteenth, Macaulay in the nineteenth, Birrell, Balfour and Lord Rosebery of our own time, belong to this choice company. Following the Rooseveltian method, one starting with Wilson would be anxious to make the acquaintance of his master, Burke.

Or following another trail one quickly comes to the illuminating political essays which composed the *Federalist*, and which are still most timely reading for the American who is interested in the ideals of the Republic. And from Madison and Hamilton it is but a step back to old Plutarch, from whom the men of that period drew their inspiration. Then Plutarch's vivid character sketches will suggest comparison with those who practice the same art today, and one will want to take up the volumes of Lytton Strachey and Gamaliel Bradford. The process is

after all the simple one by which we enlarge our personal acquaintance. A friend introduces us to his friend, and so it goes.

The fact that the reading of an essay takes but little time renders it possible to enlarge one's acquaintance without much effort. If one is reading Emerson, it is hard to avoid Carlyle. The likeness and the unlikeness between the two men pique our curiosity to know more about them. The essayists with whom we become familiar arrange themselves in groups of twos or threes.

George Bernard Shaw
Gilbert K. Chesterton

It is so with two of the best known and most prolific of living writers. When I think of George Bernard Shaw, I think of Gilbert K. Chesterton. This is not because they are alike, for they stand for sharply opposed points of view, but there is, in Milton's sonorous phrase, "a brotherly dissimilitude not vastly disproportional." It doesn't matter very much whether you begin with Shaw or with Chesterton. When you have taken an undiluted dose of one, you will feel the need of a corrective, and this is gleefully furnished by the other.

Both Shaw and Chesterton need to be read between the lines, because beneath the brilliant flashes of wit there is a serious purpose. Bernard Shaw follows

Dryden in writing plays and then writing critical introductions to them. This preface is the medium through which Shaw explains his philosophy. If the reader is provoked by it, the purpose of the writer is fulfilled, as he means to be provocative. The *New Testament* speaks of "provoking one another unto good works." Many persons who more or less violently disagree with Shaw have been provoked into thinking for themselves, much to their own profit. Shaw, a keen-witted Irishman, has delighted to attack the conventions of English society. Chesterton, while equally irreverent of what is known as Victorianism, takes up the cudgels in behalf of a more thoroughgoing conservatism. In a carefree and often irresponsible fashion, he pleads for a religion of authority, and a recognition of conventional sanctions and safeguards. The verbal brilliance of Chesterton often acts like the headlight of an automobile. The person coming from the opposite direction is dazzled by the glare and doesn't see what he is driving at. But Mr. Chesterton himself sees the road with perfect clearness. The road he travels is that of plain common sense. Writing as he has for periodicals which make an incessant demand upon him, it is amazing that he has maintained such a high degree of excellence. One might begin with his volume entitled *Orthodoxy*. Mr. Chesterton's orthodoxy is charmingly roomy. It apparently in no way interferes

with his perfect freedom of utterance. Orthodoxy to Mr. Chesterton is not a limitation. It is only a point of departure. It is a point also to which he can return when he is so disposed.

Making the acquaintance of Chesterton is a very simple matter. One has only to take up whatever volume of his essays comes to hand, and read so long as one is entertained. Then take up something else. With Shaw it is different. To appreciate his satire one must have some real interest in the thing he is, at the moment, satirizing. As he is usually "agin the government" it is well to know what particular government he is attacking, and whether it is *your* government or some other. He is an incurable Irishman living by choice in England; a socialist remarkably successful in a capitalistic society; a convinced, but unsentimental pacifist writing for a public that believes in war; a staunch believer in ideals which conflict both with popular science and popular religion, and one who has been unable to avoid an unusual amount of personal popularity. He has for many years conducted what the German strategists called "a war on two fronts." Or rather, one may say he has struck out on every side. Long ago the admirers of the highly contentious Greek theologian Athanasius had a saying "Athanasius against the World." So for a generation it has been G. B. S. against the World. It must be said that the World

has been very kind to G. B. S. and has rewarded him richly for his blows. Whether the World or Shaw has had the best of it you must find out for yourself. Perhaps *Arms and the man* is as good a place to begin as any other. Or, if you are interested in the Irish question, begin with *John Bull's other island.*

H. L. Mencken
Stuart Sherman

One may not approve of Mr. Mencken, but it is impossible to ignore him. He has too much pugnacity to allow such a thing to happen. He calls his collected essays, *Prejudices.* Mr. Mencken has not only prejudices of his own but the power of awakening prejudices against himself on the part of those who, if allowed to take their own time, would be inclined to agree with many of his contentions. He is, however, convinced that the vice of American life is a weak, good-natured conformity and he adopts the tone of the militant non-conformist on all occasions. Mr. Mencken can say with Sir Calidore in the *Faerie queene*, "The blatant beast I do pursue and through the world incessantly do chase." The blatant beast is a certain smugness and provinciality which he finds in the mind of the well-to-do American. But in Spenser's allegory Sir Calidore represents courtesy. Mr. Mencken has not considered this, and in his attacks upon his enemies is apt to follow the

soldier's rule—"treat 'em rough." Now that his iconoclastic work is done to his own satisfaction it is likely that he will care more for the amenities. At least we may hope so.

The reader who becomes conscious of unfairness on the part of Mr. Mencken in his treatment of his fellow countrymen will do well to read the essays of Stuart Sherman, especially *The genius of America.* After listening to Mr. Sherman, he will feel that it is not necessary to be a "booster" in order to have a cheerful confidence in the American people. This is reassuring as Mr. Sherman can on occasion be as iconoclastic as Mr. Mencken himself. Then let the reader turn to Emerson's essay on "Fortunes of the Republic."

"Blessed," says Emerson, "is all that agitates the mass, breaks up the torpor, and begins motion. Contrast, change, interruption are necessary to new activity and new combinations."

If that is what the Republic needs for its healthy growth, we may be thankful that the present time is not without its insurgencies.

Paul Elmer More
John Jay Chapman
Bliss Perry

To speak of an essay as scholarly is not to give it high praise. It suggests something formal and

labored. The professional scholar, setting out on a little journey, is apt to carry excess baggage. His erudition hinders free movement. The essay in his hands is apt to take the form of an academic thesis. Now a short thesis is harder to read than a long one. The Latin poet warns us against those who, laboring to be brief, become obscure.

But though the scholarly essay is not attractive to the general reader, there are thorough scholars who are also happy essayists. They have learned the art of giving us the results of their studies without suggesting the labor by which their knowledge was acquired. They do not make hard work of criticism but deal with serious subjects with unconscious ease. They do not dump their learning upon us. They fulfill the ideal of the well-instructed scribe praised in the *New Testament* who with generous hospitality brings forth out of his treasure things new and old.

This tradition of pleasant and cultivated writing has been continued in England without interruption since the time of the revival of learning in the sixteenth century. In America we have many living practitioners of this art. Paul Elmer More in the *Shelburne essays* keeps open house for those who wish to enjoy with him his treasures old and new. Mr. More believes in criticism of a somewhat more austere type than that which is common today. Taste, he

thinks, is something that can be cultivated even in a democracy. He says, "Our day has its peculiar weakness. We suffer from a murky surfeit of self-flattery and sham philanthropy, and a little of the opposite excess might help clear the air. There are several people who need to be vexed." If you wish to continue the clarifying process further, you will, after reading some of the Shelburne essays—let us say the 10th series, *Among the wits*—make the acquaintance of John Jay Chapman.

Mr. Chapman is not a voluminous writer. He reminds one of Emerson in his power to pack a great deal of thought into a single sentence. Read *Emerson and other essays* and *Greek genius and other essays*. If you want to know how much can be condensed into a slender volume take up *Letters and religion*.

In Bliss Perry we have an essayist who keeps up the tradition of *belles-lettres*. He treats literature as a fine art, and practices what he preaches. He has that quality which Tennyson described, "heart affluence in discursive talk." Read *The praise of folly*, and the other essays in that volume. Or, if you enjoy the discussion between Mr. Mencken and Mr. Sherman about America, as many readers do, you will wish to add yet another point of view. You can do no better than to look for it in Bliss Perry's *The American spirit in literature*.

Philosophers at Play

One fears to encroach upon the province of Doctor Meiklejohn, who has in this series contributed an admirable little essay on philosophy. But it happens that philosophers have contributed an unusual number of readable essays. From Plato downward there have been men of this serious brotherhood who have known how to unbend. They have made us feel with Milton,

> "*How charming is divine Philosophy,*
> *Not harsh and crabbed as dull fools suppose,*
> *But musical as is Apollo's lute*
> *And a perpetual feast of nectared sweets*
> *Where no crude surfeit reigns.*"

It is a rare philosopher who knows how to avoid the "crude surfeit." But it is remarkable how many men of the philosophic temper and training have added not only to the wisdom but to the gaiety of nations. Wit has been defined as quick wisdom. One who enjoys the kind of wisdom that comes in flashes will find the keenest pleasure in the essays of William James. The essays of Santayana are "musical as is Apollo's lute." We get the spirit of Greek philosophy revived in our modern world. And how refreshing is the contact with the virile mind of John Dewey! How stimulating is the intellectual austerity of Bertrand Russell! Nor should one neglect the

Outspoken essays of Dean Inge. Do not be deterred by the fact that he has been called "the gloomy Dean." If you are seeking the finest pleasure, don't be afraid of the philosophers. They are not really hard to understand—at least those who understand themselves are not!

The Nature Lovers

Anyone who loves nature will quickly find for himself the essayists who are after his own heart. It is a cheerful company of those who delight in the woods and fields. Izaak Walton is the dean of this brotherhood. White of Selborne, Christopher North, Thoreau, John Burroughs, John Muir, Bradford Torrey, W. H. Hudson, Dallas Lore Sharp belong to it. It would be an impertinence to recommend any one as necessary to be read. Each one appeals to his own friends.

When in the summer I visit my neighbors in the White Mountains, I find that each one has the happy assurance that the view from his front porch is the best in the neighborhood. I say nothing to contradict them, though I know that they are all wrong. The best view is from my porch.

There is one peculiarity about the nature lovers. They are not globe trotters. They usually are quite content to stay at home—there is so much there that excites curiosity. They never tire of the adventures

that they find within walking distance. It is good to make the acquaintance of such people, who are able to lead us in paths of pleasantness. The essayists of this order frequent the border line between science and poetry.

Essays of Leisure

I am inclined to think that leisure is not a condition but an art. Some people who have very little to do and no great desire to do it, are yet always in a hurry. Coming duties cast their shadows before, and there is always a sense of being driven. Other people have learned to protect themselves. There is always a little film of free time around them, which prevents undue friction.

Some essayists have learned this art, much to their own and their readers' advantage. Though they have only a little space at their disposal, they do not allow it to be crowded. There is no rude jostling of ideas. There is time to follow out any suggestion. Among American writers Agnes Repplier has this un-American accomplishment. Her *Points of view* are thoroughly individual. She has time for the little things as well as for the great. She is at her best when she is dealing with the fashions and foibles of other generations, with a shrewd side-glance at her own time.

It is not necessary that the writer should belong to the leisure class and have unlimited time at his

disposal; but he must have the power to detach himself from the hurrying crowd. Simeon Strunsky is a busy New York journalist, but some of his little essays are balm to my soul. One has missed something who has not come across Strunsky's *Post-impressions.* What refreshing sanity there is in *Sindbad and his friends*! If one fears that the essay has fallen from its high estate let him read *The common reader* by Virginia Woolf. Here are essays of distinction.

One might go on with a list of essayists with whom it is well to be acquainted. But what would be the use? Thomas Fuller in his *Church history of Britain* speaks of those who boasted of their acquaintance with early British writers:

"To most of these authors many written volumes are assigned, the titles and beginnings whereof you may find in our countrymen, Ball and Pits; who will persuade you that they have perused some of them. This they do partly to enhance the merit of their industry in finding out so many rarities, and partly to commend to the world the latitude of their own reading. I should as soon believe that they have seen all Solomon's volumes which he wrote, from the Cedar of Libanus to the hyssop that groweth on the wall. But this humour possesseth many men that brag of many books coming under their discovery, as if not only with the mice they had crept through the crannies of all libraries, but also with the moths

had got betwixt the leaves of all treatises therein. In plain truth, as it is probable that these British prelates wrote many books of consequence, so it is certain that long since by time, they have been abolished."

The same thing may be true of contemporary essays. It is probable that some of the very choicest bits of writing float about in newspapers and never attract the attention of the literary critic. Some discerning reader may preserve them in a scrap-book for his own private delectation. The very magnitude of the flood of printed matter makes it impossible for anyone to keep track of all that is excellent. All that one can do is to keep an open mind, remembering that he may at any time be entertaining literary angels unaware. Indeed, it is the awareness of these fine possibilities that is the mark of a cultivated taste.

Here is something that may or may not be good. How shall we find out? Let us taste it, and judge for ourselves. Fortunately the essay is something that can be tasted without much waste of time or danger to our digestion. There is no reason why we should not make any number of these little experiments.

It is for this reason I have avoided any definition which might indicate fastidiousness. To limit the term to the finer and more delicate kind of literature

is a mistake. It is better to take to heart the vision of Peter, of the "great sheet knit at the four corners and let down to the earth, wherein were all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts and creeping things and fowls of the air."

There are all kinds of essays, good, bad and indifferent. We take our choice. If now and then we make a mistake we are really none the worse. One can afford to take chances when he is not hazarding all his capital. The reader is not making a permanent investment. He is in a frankly speculative mood. He is prepared to show himself a good loser.

When he finds an author to his liking, the sportsmanlike reader takes him on his own terms, without demanding too much uniformity of excellence. The prudent essayist is like the seedsman with whom I deal, who prints upon every package of seeds his conditions of sale. "We give no warranty express or implied, as to description, quality, productiveness or any other matter of any plants, seeds or bulbs we sell, and we will not be in any way responsible for the crop. If the purchaser does not accept the goods on these terms, they are to be returned at once."

It is on such terms that the essayist insists. He will furnish seed thoughts, but he will not be responsible for their sprouting in his reader's mind. And I think he is right. So Burton addresses those who are bold enough to adventure on his *Anatomy of*

melancholy. He warns them that they do so at their own risk:

"It is not my study or intent to compose neatly, which an orator requires, but to express myself readily and plainly as it happens; so that as a river runs sometimes precipitate and swift, then dull and slow, now deep, then shallow; now muddy, then clear, so doth my style flow—now serious, then light, now comical, then satyrical; now more elaborate, then remiss as the present subject required, or as that time I was affected. If thou vouchsafe to read this treatise it shall be no otherwise to thee than the way to an ordinary traveller, sometimes fair, sometimes foul, barren in one place, better in another. By woods, groves, dales, plains I shall lead thee through variety of objects, that which thou shalt like, and surely dislike."

As for Burton he makes no pretensions. He does not expect to please everybody. "He is a good huntsman who can catch some, not all. I have done my endeavor. I am but a smatterer, I confess a stranger: here and there I pull a flower."

That is the attitude of all good essayists toward their own work. It is not an affectation of casualness. The casualness is real. It is a happy accident caused by a collision of thought. Such things happen sometimes in the most orderly minds. The reader's feeling is that which Sancho Panza expressed when

he said, "It is pleasant to go about in expectation of accidents."

The autocrat of the breakfast table begins with the sentence, "As I was about to say when I was interrupted." This puts us in just the right frame of mind for what follows. We expect to have a series of interruptions, and we are not disappointed.

Our purpose just now is not to study philosophy or economics or the conflicts in American public opinion. These serious matters are treated elsewhere in this series. Our purpose is to enjoy the informal essay at its best. Let me then modestly hide behind Montaigne, and let him tell how he was accustomed to read and write.

"As things come into my head, I heap them one on another, and they sometimes advance in whole bodies and sometimes in single files. I am content that every one should see my natural and ordinary pace, as ill as it is. I suffer myself to jog on at my own rate and ease. I could wish to have a more perfect knowledge of things, but I will not buy it so dear as it will cost. . . I seek in reading of books only to please myself by an irreproachable diversion. I do not bite my nails over difficulties I meet in my reading; after a charge or two I give them over. Should I insist upon them, I should lose myself and time. I have an impatient understanding. What I do not discern at first, is by persistency rendered

more obscure. I do nothing without gaiety. Continuation and a too obstinate endeavor darkens, stupefies and tires my judgment . . . If one book does not please me, I take up another. . . I speak my opinion freely of all things, even of those things that perhaps exceed my capacity, and that I do not conceive to be in any wise under my jurisdiction. And accordingly the judgment I deliver is to show the measure of my own sight and not of the things I make so bold to censure."

He likes to read writers who respect our individuality and stimulate our thinking, but he dislikes those who, as he says, "chew our meat for us." We all know the kind.

Montaigne knows well that he will be reproved by the solemnly erudite. "I make no doubt that I often speak of things that are much better and more truly handled by those who are masters of the trade. This here is but an essay of my natural parts and not of those acquired, and whoever shall take me tripping in my ignorance will not in any way displease me. Whoever goes in quest of knowledge, let him fish for it where it is to be found—there is nothing I so little profess. These are fancies of my own by which I do not pretend to discover things, but to lay myself open."

An old Puritan divine used to say that in order to keep himself in good spiritual condition he was

accustomed every day to "sweeten his mouth with a bit of Calvin." In like manner I would advise any one who wishes to appreciate the possibilities of the essay to taste a bit of Montaigne. There is no better appetizer.

But I must in closing throw out a word of warning. The informality of the essay is its chief charm, but it is also the pitfall for the unwary. One of the early poems of Keats is entitled "Sleep and Poetry." There is an analogy between the two, but it does not follow that every one who can put us to sleep is a poet. The informal essay has the appearance of ease, but it does not follow that informality of itself makes a successful essayist. He must really have something to say. If he opens his mind to us, there should be something there that is worth our seeing. When we are invited with the utmost cordiality to make ourselves at home in an unfurnished mind, we find ways to decline the invitation without hurting the feelings of the unlucky host.

One of the most felicitous titles for a collection of essays was that chosen by Augustine Birrell—*Obiter dicta.* An *obiter dictum* is a remark in passing. More specifically it is defined as "an incidental opinion given by a judge, in contradistinction from his judicial decision of the essential point." It will be noticed that you have to be a judge before your *obiter dicta* become of much value. We like to see

a judicial mind at play. There is no trick of style by which a writer can imitate another without being found out by the moderately discerning reader. When the literary trickster seems to succeed, the highest praise he receives is, "That was a very successful pose." This is true

"Whether thou choose Cervantes' serious air,
Or laugh and shake in Rabelais' easy chair."

The pseudo-Rabelais who sprawls in his easy chair and laughs at his own jokes is intolerable.

In the great library building of Harvard University there is one room which contains neatly printed notices warning students not to bring their notebooks, and requesting them to leave behind the studious habits that elsewhere are commendable. In the Farnsworth Room one is invited to read for pleasure only. It is like a parkway where heavy teaming is not allowed. Here one may find the books which one loves to pick up again and again. They are old friends and not taskmasters. The students who find time to use the Farnsworth Room, for the purpose for which it was intended, are to be congratulated. They are learning the true meaning of that much abused word "culture."

It is possible for each one of us to make a collection of books which we may treat in this fashion. They are books which appeal to our own taste.

They are not imposed upon us. We discover some quality in them that appeals to us. We have toward them the feeling of intimacy which increases with the years.

The reader who learns to divest his mind of prejudice as far as possible, and who is not afraid to sample all sorts of literature, is not without protection. He soon learns to distinguish between writing that is genuine and that which is imitative. After that he can move about in the great Fair, and enjoy the sights, and even, if he wishes, peep into the side shows, without being afraid of being taken in by the confidence men. As for the mountebanks, they are amusing and not dangerous when he recognizes that they are mountebanks.

And "finally brethren," as the old ministers would say, let me exhort you not to despise the essayist who may seem to touch too lightly on grave matters. He may have as serious a purpose as your own, and have a real moral to inculcate, though he prefers not to administer it in chunks.

I have on my table a new kind of paste which was recommended to me at the stationery store. On the bottle is the statement, "Always ready for use. Sticks best when spread thin."

It is so also with good advice.

BOOKS RECOMMENDED

The nature of the essay does not lend itself to a

formal course of reading. The finding of an essay after one's heart is a happy accident, and one can not lay out a course of happy accidents. The best thing one can do is to frequent the places where they are most likely to happen. One may recommend a trout brook, but one can not indicate the particular trout which will reward the angler's patience.

The essayists whom I have mentioned are to be recommended. They have given pleasure to others and they are likely to do so to you. But which particular one appeals to you is something no one can predict. Fortunately the tastes of readers differ as widely as the talents of writers. Thomas Carlyle spoke scornfully of Charles Lamb, and there are those who find Carlyle's *Sartor resartus* unreadable. To persons of a very straightforward and matter-of-fact temper the "urbane" essay is mere affectation.

For the convenience of readers, collections of essays have been made by competent editors, and there are critical works which may be used as we would use in traveling a good guidebook. The guidebook is not intended to tell us what we must see, it is only meant to help us find more quickly the things we want to see.

From among many, the following collections are recommended:

PROGRESSIVE READINGS IN PROSE
Edited by
Rudolph W. Chamberlain
and
Joseph S. G. Bolton

Under the heading "The Familiar Essay," you will find carefully chosen essays from Bacon to Chesterton. I would recommend Cowley's "Of Myself," Addison's "On London Cries," and Chesterton's "Of Sandals and Simplicity." In the same volume you may find Professor Huxley's essay "On a Piece of Chalk." This is a type of essay unhappily less common just now than it was a generation ago in the days of Huxley, Tyndall and John Fiske.

TYPES OF THE ESSAY
Selected and Edited
by
Benjamin A. Heydrick

Here you may find the old favorites — Charles Lamb's "Dissertation on Roast Pig," selections from Dr. Holmes' *Autocrat of the breakfast table* and from Thoreau's *Walden.* Appended to the book is a list of essays most useful to one who wants to read further.

ATLANTIC CLASSICS
Collected and Edited
by
Ellery Sedgwick

Mr. Sedgwick is the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly,* and it is his duty, every month, to reject a large number of essays that are good but not quite good enough to be printed in the *Atlantic Monthly.* Out of the number pub-

lished in the periodical he has selected those which he thinks worthy to be put between the covers of a book. The reader has the benefit of this second winnowing. Here you may find essays by Miss Repplier, E. S. Martin, Dallas Lore Sharp, Meredith Nicholson and others who are glad to be known as Atlantic Essayists. Do you know William Beebe's "Jungle Nights"? If you do not you will have a new pleasure when you take up the second series of *Atlantic classics*. If you have read it before you will have a renewed pleasure.

A BOOK OF MODERN ESSAYS
Edited by
Bruce W. McCullough
and
Edwin B. Burgum

Here you will find Stuart P. Sherman's "What is a Puritan?" You will want to read what Professor Paul Shorey says about "The American Language," especially if you have read what Mr. Mencken has written on the same subject. But do not miss Arnold Bennett's essay on "Literary Taste." Says Mr. Bennett, "Literature is first and last a means of life and the enterprise of forming one's literary taste is an enterprise of learning how best to use this means of life. People who don't want to live, people who would sooner hibernate than feel intensely, will be wise to eschew literature. They had better, to quote from the finest passage in a fine poem, 'sit around and eat blackberries.'"

MODERN ESSAYS
Selected by
Christopher Morley

Mr. Morley is himself an accomplished essayist and one should not miss the preface in which he expresses his idea of what the essay should be, and also his principle of selection for his collections. "The greater number of these essays were written, not by retired aesthetes, but by practicing journalists in the harness of the daily and weekly press." In spite of this preference for journalism many of the essays bring the sense of abundant leisure. In the first series you may find Max Beerbohm's delicious sketch, "A Clergyman." Here is also one of the best things Stuart Sherman has written: "Samuel Butler: Diogenes of the Victorians." In the second series you will find Samuel Scoville's essay called "Dragon's Blood" which takes you into the very heart of nature. In this volume you will find W. H. Hudson's "Geese" which will give you a new respect for a much misunderstood and maligned bird. In the first series you will find Hilaire Belloc's "Mowing of a Field." It is a good thing to read at any time, but especially when one is shut up in a town.

THE CRITICAL GAME
By John Macy

"Criticism," says Mr. Macy, "is one form of the game of writing. It differs from other forms only as whist differs from poker, and as tennis differs from golf."

I recommend Mr. Macy's book, because he suggests that criticism is not an esoteric art that only professionals can practice. There is no reason why we all should not play the game. That is what we all do when instead of waiting for the professional critics to tell us what we ought to admire, we use our own minds. When we reflect on what we read and ask ourselves why we find one book more enjoyable than another, then we are playing the game.

I have gone on the principle of "See America first." One who wishes to become acquainted more fully with what is being written in England may find assistance in *The modern English essay*, edited by Ernest Rhys, in five volumes. The idea of the five volumes might be prohibitive if one had to buy them, and then read them through. But the public library changes all that. If it happens to have the five volumes we can look into them and if there is something in them for us we can take it and let the rest go. I haven't yet looked into the five volumes but I have just been reading a most interesting essay by Virginia Woolf. She recommends the collection of Mr. Rhys. So I intend to look it up.

BOOKS RECOMMENDED IN THIS COURSE

PROGRESSIVE READINGS IN PROSE . . . . . *Rudolph W. Chamberlain* and *Joseph S. G. Bolton*, Eds.
Doubleday, 1923. $2.00

TYPES OF THE ESSAY . . . . *Benjamin A. Heydrick*, Ed.
Scribner, 1921. $1.00

THE ATLANTIC CLASSICS, FIRST AND SECOND SERIES
Little, 1918. 2v., $1.25 each

A BOOK OF MODERN ESSAYS
Bruce W. McCullough and *Edwin B. Burgum*, Eds.
Scribner, 1926. $2.00

MODERN ESSAYS, FIRST AND SECOND SERIES
Christopher Morley, Comp.
Harcourt, 1921, 1924. 2v., $2.00 each

THE CRITICAL GAME . . . . . *John Macy*
Boni & Liveright, 1922. $2.50

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